Vector Optimization

Role of Gene Regulatory Elements and Multicistronic Vectors One of the most important considerations in optimizing a DNA vaccine is the appropriate choice of a vector. The basic requirements for a plasmid vector are described above. It is generally believed that the level of gene expression in vivo obtained after DNA vaccination correlates with the immune response generated. Therefore, several laboratories sought to improve gene expression and immune responses after plasmid DNA vaccination. These approaches included optimizing gene regulatory elements within the plasmid backbone (e.g. promoter-enhancer complex or transcription termination signals) or modifying the plasmid backbone itself to enhance gene expression. As noted above, a requisite for a DNA vaccine vector is a promoter that stimulates a high level of gene expression within mammalian cells. Virally derived promoters have generally provided the greatest gene expression in vivo, whereas eukaryotic promoters are weaker (84, 85). The CMV immediate early enhancer-promoter produced the highest transgene expression in various tissues when compared with other promoters (84, 85). Furthermore, because optimal expression of certain mammalian genes depends on splicing of the mRNA transcript, inclusion of the first intron (intron A)of the immediate early gene from CMV in the promoter-enhancer complex further enhanced expression (86). To study the effects of manipulating transcriptional termination elements on gene expression, several different kinds of termination sequences have been studied. In one study, replacing the BGH transcriptional termination element with a transcriptonal terminator derived from the rabbit β-globin gene improved gene expression (87). Several other modifications that enhance gene expression have been examined. To express two or multiple genes in the same cell, dicistronic or multicistronic vectors with internal ribosome entry sites were studied. These vectors could be particularly useful in constructing multivalent vaccines from two or more different antigens from the same or different pathogens (88).

Effects of Manipulating Heterologous Genes on the Immune Response Optimizing codon usage for eukaryotic cells can also enhance expression of antigens. Codon bias has been observed in several species, and the use of selective codons in a particular gene correlates with efficiency of gene expression (89). This correlation was shown by using a plasmid expressing listeriolysin O, in which codons frequently used in murine genes were substituted for the native codons for the encoded antigen. This substitution led to enhanced CTL and protective immunity (90). Similar results were noted in mice, by using the HIV-1 gp120 sequence (91) or gp160 sequence (92).

A plasmid may also be engineered so that the encoded protein is either secreted or localized to the interior of the cell. Several studies show that the type and magnitude of the immune response depend on whether an antigen is secreted, bound on the surface of the cell, or retained within the cell. For example, secreted proteins induced higher IgG titers than the same antigen localized either on the

cell membrane or within the cell (60, 93–95). It is unclear from these studies how DNA immunization induces antibody production against intracellular, noncytopathic proteins, because B cells require free or membrane-bound linear determinants or conformational epitopes to initiate the process of clonal expansion for efficient antibody production. These concepts suggest that a nonsecreted intracellular antigen would not elicit antibody production (27). The evidence that the nature of the antigen used (secreted vs intracellular) can preferentially bias T-helper responses is less clear. In two separate studies, it was demonstrated that secreted antigens induced a higher IgG1:IgG2a ratio (suggesting a Th2 bias) than did antigens that remained cell associated (membrane anchored or cytosolic); however, these studies analyzed antibody subtypes rather than directly measuring cytokines and thus provide only a surrogate for T-helper responses (60, 93, 95). In a separate study, plasmid DNA expressing either secreted or intracellular antigen induced comparable levels of antigen-specific IFN-γ on in vitro stimulation (94). Taken together, these data suggest that cellular localization of the antigen after DNA immunization may play a role in modulating immune responses, although this role may depend on the nature of the antigen and model system used (95).

Optimizing Cytotoxic–T-Lymphocyte Responses

Enhancing Delivery into the Major Histocompatibility Complex Class I Pathway CTL responses can be enhanced by engineering the antigen to target specific cellular compartments. An example for this engineering is the use of N-terminal ubiquitination signals, which target the protein to proteosomes, leading to rapid cytoplasmic degradation and presentation via the MHC class-I pathway. In this regard, it was demonstrated that a DNA vaccine encoding β-gal that was fused with ubiquitin was more effective at inducing CTL responses than was a plasmid encoding β-gal alone. The latter construct was also less efficient at inducing antibody responses, suggesting that the transfected gene product was rapidly degraded intracellularly and that processing precluded the release of native polypeptides or proteins for efficient antibody production (96). These results are in agreement with studies in other model systems targeting HIV Nef (97) and LCMV nucleoprotein (98, 99).

Another approach is to design vectors that use the E3 leader sequence from adenovirus, which facilitates transport of antigens directly into the endoplasmic reticulum for binding to MHC class-I molecules, bypassing the need for the TAP transporter. The addition of the E3 leader sequence appeared to improve CTL responses for certain antigens (100, 101) but did not improve CTL in other model systems (100). These data suggest that endoplasmic reticulum-targeting of T-cell epitope DNA vaccines may not enhance the immune response for all antigens.

Epitope-Specific Responses: Minigenes and Multiple Epitopes Another interesting approach for improving the ability of DNA vaccines to generate cell-

mediated responses is to engineer vaccines that elicit epitope-specific CTL responses. Several groups have successfully used minimal-epitope vaccines to induce CTL responses (100–107). Furthermore, it was demonstrated that these minimal-epitope vaccines could function in isolation and when linked to other epitopes in a "string-of-beads" vaccine. This approach may be advantageous, because a combination of antigenic epitopes can generate a broader immune response than a DNA vaccine encoding for a single antigen. Moreover, this approach may be effective in developing a single vaccine against multiple pathogens. In this regard, epitopes from several different pathogens could be combined in a single plasmid DNA vaccine, providing an advantage over a conventional DNA vaccine strategy with a plasmid-encoding antigen(s) against a single pathogen. In a study by Thomson et al, mice vaccinated with a DNA plasmid, encoding multiple contiguous minimal-CTL epitopes derived from five separate viruses and a parasite epitope derived from malarial protein, generated MHC class I–restricted CTL responses to each of these epitopes. Furthermore, these CTLs were protective after infectious viral challenge (104). In a separate study, a novel vector containing a polyepitope construct from HIV and *Plasmodium falciparum* was also effective in generating CTL responses in mice (103).

Inclusion of a helper epitope can also enhance CTL activity after DNA vaccination (108). In a study designed to ascertain whether CTL responses generated by DNA vaccines are dependent on MHC class-II/CD4 help, CTL responses generated against a minimal epitope class-I–restricted OVA peptide were compared with those of a similar construct with the adjacent MHC class-II–restricted epitope. Very low or negligible CTL responses were observed in mice vaccinated with a minimal-epitope MHC class-I–restricted DNA construct. In contrast, mice vaccinated with either a full-length ovalbumin construct or a DNA construct with both MHC class-I and class-II epitopes induced a robust CTL response (108). These observations are in contrast to several studies in which minimal-epitope DNA vaccines generated robust CTL responses. Potential explanations for these differences include the following: (*a*)the polyepitope vaccines could lead to the assembly of neoepitopes that served to generate MHC class-II help; (*b*) CpG sequences can potently activate DCs in a nonspecific manner (27) and prime $CD8^+$ T cells in the absence of CD4 help; and (*c*) CpG motifs induce IFN-α, a cytokine shown to be important in expansion of $CD8^+$ T cells (82).

Role of Cytosine-Phosphate-Guanosine Motifs

Over the past decade, portrayals of DNA as immunologically inert have been challenged. New data indicate that bacterial DNA can trigger and instruct the immune system to respond to danger and plays an important role in host defense. This role includes B-cell activation resulting in antibody production, stimulation of cytokine-producing cells, and activation of the innate immune system. The subsequent identification of CpG motifs present in bacterial DNA as potent immu-

nostimulatory molecules has spurred tremendous interest in the development of immune-based therapies and of a new generation of experimental vaccines.

Immunostimulatory Properties of Cytosine-Phosphate-Guanosine DNA As noted above, it was recently shown that a specific sequence motif present in bacterial DNA elicits an innate immune response characterized by the production of IL-6, IL-12, TNF-α, and IFN-γ. Several lines of evidence suggest that CpG motifs in plasmid vectors contribute to the immunogenicity of DNA vaccines. First, vectors lacking protein-encoding inserts induce cytokine production in vitro in a manner indistinguishable from bacterial DNA (109). Second, when the cytosine of the CpG dinucleotides present in plasmid vectors is selectively methylated with Sss-I CpG methylase, the vaccine's ability to stimulate cytokine production in vitro and antibody or CTL production in vivo is concomitantly reduced (14, 109). Third, coadministering ODN that contains CpG motifs with an antigenic protein boosts the antibody and cellular response similar to that achieved by DNA vaccination with a plasmid encoding the same antigen (110–112). Indeed, coadministering vector alone (without the antigen-encoding insert) also improves the immune response elicited by DNA vaccines. Presumably, CpG motifs present in the vector act as adjuvants in a fashion similar to CpG ODNs. This observation raises the interesting possibility that higher doses of a DNA vaccine or the coadministration of multiple antigen-encoding plasmids might synergistically boost the immune response to each element of a multicomponent vaccine.

Perhaps the strongest evidence the CpG motifs contribute to the immunogenicity of DNA vaccines was provided by Sato et al, who substituted a CpG-containing *ampR* gene for a *kanR*-selectable marker in a β-gal–encoding plasmid. They found that the reengineered plasmid elicited a higher IgG antibody response, more CTLs, and greater IFN-γ production than did the original vector (14). The same effect was observed when additional CpG motifs were introduced into the plasmid backbone of the *kanR*-containing vector, a result subsequently confirmed in several other vectors by other laboratories (52, 109, 113, 114). As noted above, this effect is most apparent when low doses of DNA vaccine are administered, presumably because, at high dose, endogenous CpG motifs in plasmid vectors perform the same function. Thus, additional CpG motifs may decrease the amount of vaccine required to induce an immune response rather than increase the absolute magnitude of that response. Indeed, CpG motifs appear to be limited in their ability to augment antibody and cytokine production in vivo such that too many CpG motifs may actually reduce immunogenicity (114). For example, introducing 16 additional CpG motifs into the plasmid backbone improved the humoral immune response by the DNA vaccines, whereas introducing 50 such motifs was detrimental. The above studies were performed in mice, the animals in which the effects of CpG ODNs were first described. Of interest, the 6-base-pair motif that induces optimal stimulation in mice is less effective when tested on cells of primate origin (human, monkey, or chimpanzee). Thus, efforts to improve the efficacy of DNA vaccines intended for human use would require identification of

those sequence motifs that are optimally immunostimulatory in humans. Toward this end, Liang et al (115) identified several ODNs that induced proliferation and Ig secretion of human B cells. They did not, however, systematically examine the size or sequence of the CpG motif that provided optimal immune activation. Ballas et al (116) reported that an AACGTT motif embedded in an ODN at least 15 base pairs in length stimulated the proliferation of human NK cells ; however, it is unclear whether this motif is optimally immunostimulatory. In this context, recent evidence suggests that at least two different human cell types respond to ODN stimulation and that different CpG motifs are required to stimulate these distinct cell populations. These findings suggest that it may be possible to tailor the type of immune response elicited by a DNA vaccine by selectively engineering one, the other, or both types of stimulatory motifs into a vector.

Immonosuppressive DNA Motifs Whereas CpG-containing bacterial DNA causes immune stimulation in vivo and in vitro, coadministration of mammalian DNA can block such activation. This suppression may account for the inability of mammalian DNA, which contains CpG motifs (albeit at much lower frequency than bacterial DNA), to stimulate the immune system. Several laboratories have shown that a subset of nonstimulatory ODNs can suppress the immune activation induced by ODNs that contain CpG motifs. Hacker et al (117) showed that an excess of non-CpG ODNs could inhibit the uptake of fluorescein-isothiocyanate–labeled CpG ODNs. This inhibition abrogated the ability of CpG ODNs to induce immune stimulation, interfering with cytokine production and stress kinase activation (117). Recent work by Krieg et al (114) confirmed that the immunostimulatory activity of CpG ODNs could be blocked by certain non-CpG motifs. They showed that eliminating suppressive motifs (tandem repeats of GpC) from the plasmid backbone of a DNA vaccine improved immunogenicity up to threefold. These observations demonstrate the complexity of the interaction between DNA sequence motifs and the immune system.

An important feature of CpG motifs is their ability to stimulate multiple types of immune cells. They improve antigen-presenting function by monocytes, macrophages, and DCs, induce proliferation of B cells, and boost antibody production by antigen-activated lymphocytes. Efforts are under way to identify the sequence motifs that are optimally active in humans, to determine whether different motifs can be used to regulate discrete elements of the immune system, and to establish where in the plasmid these immunostimulatory sequences can be introduced to greatest benefit. Presumably, this will include the elimination of suppressive motifs present in the plasmid backbone. These efforts are likely to yield vectors with significantly improved immunostimulatory capacities for clinical use.

Role of Cytokines and Costimulatory DNA Adjuvants

Because cytokines or costimulatory cell surface molecules play a crucial role in generation of the effector T-cell subsets and in determining the magnitude of the response, several groups have used plasmid DNA encoding various cytokine or

costimulatory molecules to enhance or bias the immune response generated by DNA vaccination. The studies with cytokine-encoding DNA and their effects on humoral and cellular immunity are summarized in Table 2 (211–244).

TABLE 2 Cytokine and costimulatory DNA adjuvants

Cytokine	Antibody	Cellular response	CTL	References
IL-1	↑IgG	↑proliferation	↑CTL	211-213
	↑IgG2a	↑IFN-γ		
IL-2	↑IgG	↑proliferation	↑CTL	212-219
	↑IgG2a	↑IFN-γ		
	↑IgG1[a]			
IL-4	↑IgG	↑proliferation		156, 212, 213,
	↑IgG1	↓DTH		216, 218, 219
		↑IL-4		
IL-5	↑IgG	±proliferation		213
IL-6				220
IL-7	↑IgG2a	↑IFN-γ		217
	↑IgG1			
IL-8		↑Neutrophils		221
IL-10	↑G	↓DTH		213, 219,
	↓IgG2a	↓proliferation		222-224
IL-12	↑Ig2a	↑DTH	↑CTL	31, 79, 156, 212,
	↑ or ↓ IgG1[a]	↑proliferation		213, 217-219,
	↑ or ↓ IgG[a]	↑IFN-γ		225-229
IL-15	?↑IgG[a]	± ↑proliferation	↑CTL	213
IL-18	↑IgG	↑proliferation	↑CTL	213
TNF	↑IgG	↑proliferation	↑CTL	93, 213
GM-CSF	↑IgG	↑proliferation	↑CTL	31, 93, 156, 211,
	↑IgG2a and	↑IFN-γ		212, 216, 218,
	IgG1[a]	↑IL-4		219, 230-233
TGF-β	↑IgG1	↓DTH		157, 234
		↓proliferation		
		↓cytokines		
IFN-γ	↑IgG2a	↑ or ↓proliferation	↑CTL	93, 157, 212,
	↑ or ↓IgG[a]	↑IFN-γ, ↓IL-5		218, 233, 235
IFN-α				236, 237
B7-1 (CD80)			↑CTL[a]	31, 238-241
B7-2 (CD86)		↑DTH	↑CTL[a]	31, 238-241
		↑Proliferation		

(continued)

TABLE 2 (continued) Cytokine and costimulatory DNA adjuvants

Cytokine	Antibody	Cellular response	CTL	References
CD40L	↑IgG2a ↑IgG, ↑IgG1[a]	↑IFN-γ	↑CTL	226, 242
ICAM-1 (CD54)		↑proliferation ↑IFN-γ ↑β-chemokines	↑CTL	243
LFA-3		↑proliferation ↑IFN-γ ↑β-chemokines	↑CTL	243
L-selectin	↑IgG ↑IgG2a>IgG1	↑proliferation		244
CTLA4	↑IgG ↑IgG1>IgG2a	↑proliferation		244

[a]Changes in antibody or cellular responses are not in agreement between studies.

Alternative Boost

Although DNA vaccination alone can elicit potent humoral and cellular responses to many antigens, it appears that for certain antigens (e.g. HIV envelope proteins and malarial proteins), the immune response generated by DNA vaccination may be suboptimal for protection. In such instances, alternative booster regimens have been shown to be helpful. The most common of these booster regimens have used either recombinant protein or poxviruses. Thus, for HIV, because multiple DNA vaccinations elicit only modest and transient titers of neutralizing antibody (118–124), there have been many studies evaluating the effects of peptide (125) or protein boosting after DNA vaccination (119, 126–128). In two separate studies that used rhesus macaques, it was shown that antibody production could be substantially increased in monkeys vaccinated with DNA encoding an HIV-1 envelope protein followed by a protein boost (127, 128). In one of these reports, monkeys were protected after an infectious challenge (127). In a separate study, rabbits primed with various HIV-1 *env*-expressing plasmids had a rapid increase in the titer of antibody after a protein boost; however, the avidity and neutralizing activity rose more slowly. In contrast to HIV, high titers of antibody with good avidity and persistence were induced after DNA vaccination encoding an influenza virus HA glycoprotein without any protein boost (119). Taken together, these data underscore a potential difference between HIV and other viral proteins in requiring a protein boost after DNA vaccination to optimize both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the humoral response.

As noted above, although protein boosting enhanced the antibody response after DNA vaccination, there is little evidence that it affects the cellular immune response. Because cellular immunity might be required for protection against diseases such as HIV infection and malaria, there have been several studies attempting to increase cellular responses after DNA vaccination by using recombinant poxviruses. In several such studies, boosting with recombinant poxvirus substantially enhanced CTL and/or IFN-γ responses in mice primed with DNA encoding either a malarial (129–131) or HIV envelope protein (132, 133). It should be noted that, whereas antibody production was also increased after DNA and poxvirus boosting in mice, by using vectors encoding malarial proteins (130), antibody production was not enhanced and eventually declined in rhesus macaques vaccinated with DNA and boosted with fowl pox-encoding HIV proteins (132). To conclude, in both malaria- and HIV-infected rodent and nonhuman primate models, DNA vaccination followed by poxvirus boosting gave consistent and striking increases in cellular immunity. One caveat that may be important with regard to vaccination against diseases requiring both humoral and cellular immunity (i.e. HIV infection) is whether this type of boosting also limits antibody responses.

Modes of Administration

Route and Dosage A variety of routes of DNA injection, including intramuscular, intradermal, intravenous, intraperitoneal (134), epidermal delivery by scarification (34), oral (135–138), intranasal (134, 139–144), vaginal (145, 146), and, more recently, noninvasive vaccination to the skin (147) have been studied. The most common immunization routes studied have been intramuscular and, to a lesser extent, subcutaneous or intradermal. DNA is administered in a variety of diluents including distilled water, saline, and sucrose. For intramuscular injections, although some investigators have used agents such as cardiotoxin, bupivacaine, or hypertonic solutions (148, 149) to pretreat the muscle tissue to improve responses, additional studies suggest little benefit. Whereas the optimal dose depends on the particular antigen and model system used, typically, 10 to 100 μg of plasmid DNA is required to elicit responses when administered intramuscularly or subcutaneously. By contrast, immunization of DNA by gene gun often requires 0.1–1 μg of plasmid DNA to induce antibody or CTL responses. Thus, in terms of the amount of DNA used, immunization of plasmid DNA with a gene gun is the most efficient mode of delivery (134); however, as noted above, DNA immunization via gene gun can qualitatively alter the type of immune response that is generated. Although doses of 25 to 100 μg per injection (intramuscularly) are usually sufficient in mice, higher doses appear to be required in primates or humans. In a study of human volunteers given a DNA vaccine encoding a malarial antigen, doses of plasmid DNA in the 500- to 2500-μg range gave enhanced CTL responses (150). Whereas a single vaccination with DNA can induce both an antibody and CTL response in several model systems, both cellular

and humoral immune responses are increased by successive boosting (one or two additional immunizations). This requirement for multiple immunizations is well documented for the induction of humoral responses to HIV envelope proteins (118–124). It should be noted, however, that, in one study, antibody responses to HIV-1 gp120 were actually enhanced in rhesus macaques when the number of DNA vaccinations (as delivered by gene gun) was reduced but the interval between immunizations increased, suggesting the importance of a rest period between immunizations (128). Similar results were noted after DNA vaccination (given either by gene gun or intramuscularly) that expressed the circumsporozoite protein from *Plasmodium berghei* in mice (151).

Mucosal Immunization Induction of mucosal immunity by DNA immunization after immunization by several different mucosal routes has been studied. These include application of plasmid DNA intranasally (134, 139–144), intratracheally (134, 152, 153), by aerosol (154, 155), by genital-tract immunization (145, 146), and by oral administration (135–138). In addition, in several studies, plasmid DNA was combined with various immunity-enhancing regimens such as cholera toxin (140, 141), plasmid-encoding cytokines (156), liposomes (139, 152, 154, 155), or other adjuvants (142, 143).

There has been great interest in generating specific types of immune responses after mucosal immunization. In autoimmune models of disease, oral administration of protein can lead to immune tolerance. By contrast, for viral infections such as HIV and herpes simplex virus, the generation of potent antibody and/or cellular responses may be critical in mediating protection. Owing to the importance of the mucosal immune response for these diseases, studies were undertaken to compare the immune responses elicited by mucosal immunization with those achieved after systemic immunization. First, for antibody production, although many studies showed that serum IgG responses after mucosal immunization were comparable with those elicited after systemic immunization with the same plasmid constructs (142, 143, 146), other groups have demonstrated that mucosal immunization did not lead to an efficient induction of serum IgG responses (134, 140, 141). Of note is that mucosal immunization was superior to systemic immunization at inducing and sustaining mucosal IgA responses in all studies in which data examining this effect were available (142, 143, 146). Whereas mucosal DNA vaccination was advantageous in generating mucosal IgA responses, it was demonstrated in a murine model of herpes simplex virus infection that, despite the presence of virus-specific IgA at the time of challenge, virus could persist and replicate at the mucosal site of challenge (157). These results suggest either a failure of these immunization regimens to induce an adequate IgA response or the requirement for additional immune mechanisms to control viral replication at the mucosal site.

For cellular immunity, the ability of DNA vaccines given mucosally or systemically to induce local mucosal T-cell responses has not been directly demonstrated; however, cellular responses have been studied from spleen cells of mice

after vaccination via systemic or mucosal routes. In two of these studies, delayed-type hypersensitivity (DTH) responses and specific cytolytic activity from spleen cells was comparable between the two routes (142, 143). To conclude, determination of whether mucosal or systemic vaccination with DNA affects the cellular response at specific mucosal sites will likely be important for designing vaccines against such pathogens as HSV and HIV.

A potentially exciting means of mucosal DNA delivery is the use of microparticles. Plasmid DNA trapped in these biodegradable microparticles, composed of polymers such as polylactice-coglycolides or chitosan, can be administered orally and has been shown to induce both mucosal and systemic immune responses (135, 138). The ability of polylactice-coglycolide–entrapped DNA vaccines to induce protective immune responses to rotavirus challenge after oral administration was demonstrated in two separate studies (136, 137). In addition to uses for infectious pathogens, oral administration of DNA vaccines has also been shown to be useful in treating allergic diseases. Recently, an oral DNA vaccine containing the gene for the main peanut allergen (*Arah2*) protected mice against peanut-induced anaphylaxis. This protection was correlated with a reduction of IgE (a surrogate for a Th2 response), providing further evidence that DNA vaccination by its preferences to stimulate Th1 responses may have broad clinical applications (138). Finally, delivery of plasmid DNA orally with attenuated enteric bacteria such as *Salmonella* or *Shigella* spp. is an active area of investigation (see below).

Carrier-Mediated Approaches to Optimizing DNA Vaccines It appears that a majority of the DNA injected intramuscularly is degraded by extracellular deoxyribonucleases (158, 159). It follows that protecting plasmid DNA from extracellular degradation by introducing it directly into target cells should optimize DNA uptake. Several methods of carrier-mediated DNA transfection have been successful.

Gene gun Gene gun technology uses a gas-driven biolistic bombardment device that propels gold particles coated with plasmid DNA directly into the skin (7, 33, 134, 160). These gold particles are propelled directly into the cytosol of target cells, resulting in transgene expression levels higher than those obtained by comparable doses of "naked DNA." This mode of immunization induces protective immunity in several animal models of disease.

Liposomes Liposomes are bilayered membranes consisting of amphipathic molecules (polar and nonpolar portions) such as phospholipids, forming unilayered or multilayered (lamellar) vesicles. Unilamellar vesicles have a single bilayer membrane surrounding an aqueous core and are characterized by either being small or large unilamellar vesicles, whereas multilayered vesicles have several lipid bilayers separated by a thin aqueous phase. Because liposomes can be prepared with significant structural versatility based on vesicle surface charge, size,

lipid content, and coentrapment of adjuvants, they offer considerable flexibility toward vaccine optimization. The full scope of the use f liposomes to increase the effect of DNA vaccines is currently an active area of investigation. Intramuscular injection of plasmid DNA (hepatitis B surface antigen) entrapped in liposomes elicited 100-fold increased antibody titers and increased levels of both IFN-γ and IL-4 when compared with those in animals injected with "naked DNA" (161). A similar result on antibody augmentation was seen when DNA/liposome complexes were administered intranasally (139).

Cochleates Cochleates are rigid calcium-induced spiral bilayers of anionic phospholipids. They have a unique structure that is different from that of liposomes. They are relatively stable after lyophilization or in harsh environments. It is believed that, on contact with target cell membrane, a fusion event occurs between the membrane and the outer layer of the cochleate leading to delivery of the contents of the cochleate into the cytosol. It has been reported that DNA/cochleate formulations were able to induce strong CTL and antibody responses after parenteral or oral administration (162–164).

Microparticle encapsulation Another potentially exciting means of DNA delivery is the use of biodegradable polymeric microparticles. Plasmid DNA trapped in these polymers (e.g. polylactice-coglycolides or chitosan) can be given systemically or to mucosal surfaces (orally or via the respiratory tract). The ability of polylactice-coglycolide–entrapped DNA vaccines to induce asystemic and mucosal immune responses after oral or intraperitoneal administration has been demonstrated (see above).

Attenuated organisms Delivery of DNA can also be accomplished by attenuated intracellular bacteria. Intracellular bacteria, carrying the DNA, undergo phagocytosis by APCs, delivering plasmid DNA into the host cell phagosome or cytosol. The released DNA is then transcribed, resulting in expression of encoded antigens. Attentuated strains of invasive bacteria *Shigella flexneri* (165, 166), *Salmonella typhimurium* (167, 168), and *Listeria monocytogenes* (169) have been used for the delivery of plasmid DNA. For *S. typhimurium*, the bacteria are lysed within the phagosome, releasing plasmid DNA from this compartment into the cytoplasm via an unknown mechanism. Vaccination of mice with attenuated *S. typhimurium* transformed with plasmid DNA encoding lysteriolysin induced specific antibody as well as T-cell responses (167). Moreover, in a separate study, fluorescent DCs were demonstrated after oral administration of *S. typhimurium* harboring plasmid DNA encoding green fluorescent protein. These data provided evidence that this delivery system could target relevant immune cells, leading to efficient induction of an immune response (168). For *Shigella* infection, after phagocytosis and lysis within host cells, antigenic material is released directly into the cytoplasm. Immunization by using attenuated *S. flexneri* transformed with a bacterial plasmids encoding β-gal led to induction of a strong antigen-specific

humoral and cellular response (166). In a separate study, it was shown that mice vaccinated with attenuated *Shigella* vaccine harboring measles virus genes induced a vigorous antigen-specific response (170). Finally, delivery of eukaryotic expression vectors in murine macrophage cell lines by attenuated suicide *L. monocytogenes* has also been reported (169). Whereas immunization with naked DNA has not been reported to lead to genomic integration with a significant frequency (see below), delivery of DNA by *L. monocytogenes* has resulted in chromosomal integration in vitro (169, 171), raising safety concerns with this technology.

Alphaviruses are arthropod-borne togaviruses with a positive-polarity and single-stranded RNA genome that can replicate in a large number of animal hosts. Development of a variety of expression strategies has made it possible to deliver foreign genes in vivo by using alphaviruses (reviewed in 172). During infection, viral RNA replication is initiated by translation of viral nonstructural replicase proteins directly from the viral genome. During replication, both full-length genomic RNA and RNA initiated from an internal viral subgenomic promoter are synthesized. These subgenomic RNA transcripts are produced in excess relative to the genomic RNA and serve as mRNA for viral structural proteins. Thus, the natural viral life cycle permits striking amplification of mRNA. It has been shown that substitution of a heterologous gene for a viral structural gene results in high-level expression of the heterologous gene. Recently, the development of a layered plasmid DNA-based expression system by using alphaviruses has been described (173–176). The mode of heterologous gene expression from alphavirus-derived expression vectors differs from that of conventional DNA vaccine plasmids in that transcription of heterologous genes is achieved in multiple steps. The first step involves the generation of viral genomic RNA that functions as a template for mRNA synthesis. Second, taking advantage of the virus life cycle, amplification of mRNA is achieved to drive the synthesis of antigen-encoding sequences. As the virus encodes machinery required for RNA replication and amplification in the host cell cytoplasm, high levels of protein production can be obtained, thus circumventing many problems associated with nuclear gene expression (such as limitation of transcription factors, RNA transport, etc). This method of gene delivery provides an exciting advance in the field of DNA vaccines, because these vectors can express heterologous proteins at higher levels than can conventional DNA vaccines (177).

Somatic transgene immunization The concept of expressing T-cell epitopes in Ig has been demonstrated in foreign genes inserted into one or more of the complementary determining regions in the Ig heavy-chain molecule (antigenized antibodies), leading to induction of an immune response against the heterologous epitopes. A DNA-based approach as an alternative to the above has recently been described. In two separate studies, it was demonstrated that antigenized antibody-DNA constructs containing either a B-cell epitope or a B- and T-cell epitope engineered to different complement-determining regions led to the production of an antibody response directed against both epitopes (178, 179). Unlike conven-

tional DNA vaccines, immunization with these constructs led to an efficient detection of both transgene expression in vivo and transgene product in the serum.

APPLICATION

For details on models for specific applications of DNA vaccines, see Tables 3A–3D, which are produced in their entirety at the Annual Reviews world-wide-web site (www.AnnualReviews.org). These tables provide data on models for allergic diseases (Table 3A), autoimmune diseases (Table 3B), infectious diseases (Table 3C), and tumors (Table 3D).

SAFETY

A number of safety concerns have been raised about the use of DNA vaccines. These include the possibility that such vaccines may (*a*)integrate into the host genome, thereby increasing the risk of malignancy (by activating oncogenes or inactivating tumor suppressor genes); (*b*) induce responses against transfected cells, thereby triggering the development of autoimmune disease; (*c*) induce tolerance rather than immunity; and/or (*d*) stimulate the production of cytokines that alter the host's ability to respond to other vaccines and resist infection (180).

Plasmids can persist at the site of injection for many months. They can also be found far from the original site of injection (including the gonads), perhaps carried by transfected lymphocytes or macrophages. Long-term persistence may be especially common for plasmids that encode self-antigens, because these do not induce an immune response against the cell they transfect. To date, there is no clear evidence that plasmids integrate, yet neither has this possibility been eliminated. Efforts to prove that high-molecular-weight (genomic) DNA does not contain plasmids (proof that integration has not taken place) have failed, in part because of contamination of the high-molecular-weight fraction by plasmid concatamers combined with the enormous sensitivity of the polymerase chain reaction. To overcome this problem, investigators digested genomic DNA with a restriction enzyme that is specific for a single site within the plasmid. By repeatedly digesting and isolating high-molecular-weight DNA, most but not all of the plasmid can be eliminated (181). Whether the few remaining copies of plasmids represent integration events remains to be determined.

Concern that DNA vaccines might promote the development of autoimmune diseases arises from the immunostimulatory activity of CpG motifs in the plasmid backbone. It has been known for many years that bacterial DNA can induce the production of anti–double-stranded-DNA autoantibodies in normal mice and accelerate the development of autoimmune disease in lupus-prone animals (182–184). The CpG motifs present in bacterial DNA and DNA vaccines stimulate the production of IL-6 and block the apoptotic death of activated lymphocytes, both

functions that predispose to the development of systemic lupus erythematosus by facilitating persistent B-cell activation (185–190).

These findings led several groups to investigate whether systemic autoimmune disease was induced or accelerated by the CpG motifs (191). With sensitive spot enzyme-linked immuno spot (ELIspot) assays, the absolute number of B cells secreting autoantibodies was studied in normal mice repeatedly immunized with a DNA vaccine. Shortly after vaccination, the number of IgG anti-DNA–secreting cells rose by two- to threefold (192). This was accompanied by a 35%–60% increase in serum IgG anti-DNA antibody titer. This modest rise in autoantibody level did not, however, result in the development of disease in normal mice or accelerate disease in lupus-prone animals (191–194). Thus, although the theoretical possibility remains that a subset of DNA vaccines (particularly those encoding determinants cross-reactive with self) may induce or accelerate autoimmune disease, findings to date suggest that the level of autoantibody production elicited by DNA vaccines is insufficient to induce such an outcome.

The situation is somewhat more complex for organ-specific autoimmune disease, whose induction is promoted by strong type I immune responses. In an IL-12–dependent model of experimental allergic encephalomyelitis, animals treated with CpG motifs and then challenged with myelin basic protein developed autoreactive Th1 effector cells that caused experimental allergic encephalomyelitis (65). In a molecular mimicry model, CpG motifs acted as potent immunoactivators, inducing autoimmune myocarditis when coinjected with *Chlamydia*-derived antigen (195). These findings indicate that CpG motifs may trigger deleterious autoimmune reactions under certain circumstances. Balancing these safety concerns is the observation that toxicity has not been reported among normal animals treated with therapeutic doses of DNA vaccines or CpG ODNs. In addition, hundreds of human volunteers have been exposed to plasmid DNA vaccines without serious adverse consequences.

Most vaccines intended for human use are administered to infants and children. Owing to the immaturity of their immune systems, newborns exposed to foreign antigens are at risk for developing tolerance rather than immunity (196). A number of factors influence the development of neonatal tolerance, including the nature, concentration, and mode of antigen presentation to the immune system as well as the age of the host (197–199). Because the protein encoded by a DNA vaccine is produced endogenously and expressed in the context of self-MHC, the potential exists for the neonatal immune system to recognize it as "self," resulting in tolerance rather than immunity. Consistent with such a possibility, a DNA vaccine encoding the circumsporozoite protein of malaria was found to induce tolerance rather than immunity in newborn mice (200). Neonatal animals treated with this vaccine were unable to generate T- or B-cell responses when challenged with pCSP as adults, thereby remaining at increased risk from infection despite immunization (200, 201). In this system, the induction of tolerance was critically dependent on the age at which the vaccine was administered. Tolerance was observed only when vaccine was administered to mice <8 days of age; however,

decreased protection was also observed in geriatric mice (>2 years of age), raising concern that DNA vaccines might be less immunogenic in the elderly as well as in the very young (202). Efforts are under way to improve the overall immunogenicity of DNA vaccines by coadministering plasmids encoding cytokines or costimulatory molecules. Recent results suggest that these approaches can improve immunization of neonates and the elderly (199, 203–209).

Safety concerns also arise from the use of CpG motifs or cytokine-encoding plasmids as adjuvants to improve the in vivo response elicited by DNA vaccines. An important component of immune homeostasis is through a balance in the production of Th1 cytokines (which promote cell-mediated immunity) and Th2 cytokines (which facilitate humoral immune responses or counterregulate Th1 responses). These two classes of cytokine-producing cells form a dynamic and mutually inhibitory network, because Th1 cytokines can block the maturation of Th2-type cells and vice versa. The overproduction of one type of cytokine can disrupt immune homeostasis, thereby altering the host's response to other vaccines, susceptibility to infection, and predisposition to develop autoimmune disease. Although the use of cytokine-encoding plasmids is growing in popularity, relatively little information is available on their long-term safety. Although no serious side effects have been reported after the administration of cytokine-encoding plasmids in animals, it is unclear whether systematic efforts to detect such events were undertaken. Studies indicate that cytokine-encoding plasmids given in conjunction with antigen do alter the cytokine milieu (ratio of Th1-:Th2-secreting cells) and ultimately bias the immune response. In contrast, cytokine DNA given alone did not appear to alter immune reactivity against unrelated antigens and did not lead to the development of autoimmunity (203, 210). Indeed, no change in the frequency of Th1 or Th2 cytokine-secreting precursors was detected in mice treated multiple times with IFN-γ-, IL-4-, or granulocyte/macrophage colony-stimulating factor–encoding plasmids. It thus appears that the cytokine released by transfected cells primarily affects local rather than systemic immunity, leaving serum cytokine levels generally unchanged.

CONCLUSIONS

DNA vaccines moved very rapidly from laboratory phenomena into clinical trials. This transition was sustained by our ability to harness the tools of molecular biology to design antigen-encoding plasmids capable of inducing immune responses against pathogens for which no conventional vaccine was available, yet enthusiasm for this new technology must be tempered by an appreciation of its potential risks. The long-term sequelae of DNA vaccination have received little attention despite the capacity of these plasmids to persist in vivo for months or years. As multicomponent DNA vaccines and DNA vaccines encoding both cytokines and antigens become more common, the possibility for detrimental side effects will increase. DNA vaccines have the potential to be administered to mil-

lions of children and/or adults. Thus, adverse events occurring even at low frequency (<1 /1000) could affect many thousands of otherwise healthy individuals. Adequate preclinical studies coupled with large-scale human trials will still be needed to establish the risk of this new vaccine approach. To aid in this effort, the Food and Drug Administration has published "*Points to Consider*" a document that provides valuable suggestions for the evaluation of the safety, potency, and immunogenicity of candidate DNA vaccines (210a).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Brenda Rae Marshall for editing the manuscript.

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Revising the "Points to Consider" Document on DNA Vaccines

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Plasmid DNA Vaccines

- DNA plasmids are designed so that a strong promoter drives the expression of one or more genes encoding the protein(s) of interest.
- The immunogenicity of DNA plasmids promised to revolutionize vaccine development:
  - Eliminated roadblocks to vaccine development:
    - Pathogen isolation, growth, purification and attenuation
    - Protein identification, production and purification
  - Tools of molecular biology used to isolate/clone relevant genes.
- Animal studies indicated that DNA vaccines could induce protective antibody and CTL responses *in vivo*.

DNA Vaccine Induced Immunity (Animals)

- Antibody
  - IgM (1 week); IgG (2-3 weeks)
  - Memory response after boosting
  - Duration influenced by the strength of the immunogen
- Cytokines
  - Dominated by Th1 cytokine production (IFNg)
  - Modest Th2 immunity (IL-4)
  - Influenced by site of injection, nature of encoded antigen
- Cytotoxic T lymphocytes
  - Generally arise only after boosting
  - Associated with strong Th1 response
  - Persist long-term

Human Experience with DNA Vaccines

- DNA plasmids appear to be safe and well tolerated.
- Multiple immunizations are required to elicit even modest immune responses.
- Ongoing efforts are directed towards improving immunogenicity in Man.

Strategies to Improve DNA Vaccine Efficacy

- Immunize with plasmids encoding multiple antigens.
- Improve plasmid delivery:
  - Microencapsulation (liposomes)
  - Electroporation
- Add immune adjuvants (cytokine encoding plasmids)
- Improve gene expression:
  - Alter promoter/leader sequence
  - Increase CpG content of the plasmid backbone
  - "Humanize" antigen encoding gene sequence.
- Combination vaccines:
  - DNA vaccine prime, protein or viral vector boost

Impetus for Revisions to CBER Guidance

- "Once CBER has more experience in the review of plasmid DNA vaccine products, abbreviated preclinical development programs may be proposed for common plasmid vectors."

  Points to Consider on Plasmid DNA Vaccines (12/27/1996)

- CBER has gained enormous insight into DNA vaccine safety and immunogenicity over the past 8 years.
- This knowledge base allows CBER to revise the PTC document to better facilitate the development of vaccines targeting biothreat and conventional pathogens.

Safety Issues Associated with DNA Vaccines

- Induction of autoimmunity
  - Local inflammatory responses (myositis)
  - Organ-specific autoimmunity
- Persistence and integration of plasmid DNA
  - Sites of uptake and expression
  - Persistence of plasmid and protein product
  - Integration into the host genome
- General toxicity

Concern: DNA Vaccination may Induce Autoimmune Disease

OBSERVATION: DNA plasmids contain immunostimulatory CpG motifs that:

- Induce the production of pro-inflammatory and Th1 cytokines
- Stimulate the production of IgG anti-DNA autoantibodies

Results from Autoimmunity Studies

- CpG DNA induced a 2-5 fold increase in autoantibody production for up to 1 week.
- DNA vaccination did not induce autoimmune disease in normal animals, or accelerate the onset/severity of disease in lupus-prone animals.
- CpG DNA promoted the development of organ-specific autoimmune disease when co-administered with self antigen.
- No systemic or organ-specific autoimmunity has been observed in DNA-vaccinated volunteers.

Proposed Revisions to CBER Guidelines

- CBER will no longer mandate that preclinical studies examine whether DNA vaccines induce autoimmune disease.
- If the formulation or content of a specific DNA vaccine raises concern that immunization may induce autoimmunity, specific pre-clinical and phase I clinical assessments will be requested on a case-by-case basis.

Concern: Integration of Plasmid DNA may cause Genetic Toxicity

- Vaccine-derived promoters/enhancers may alter the expression of host genes (including oncogenes).
- Genomic instability (breaks or rearrangements)
- Inactivation of tumor suppressors.
- Integration into reproductive tissue may result in germline alteration.

Strategies for Assessing Genetic Toxicity

- PCR was used to monitor the biodistribution and persistence of plasmid.
  - Identify sites of plasmid uptake after *in vivo* delivery.
  - Quantify the amount of plasmid in each tissue.
  - Monitor the persistence of plasmid at each site over time (2 month follow-up).
- Size fractionation coupled with PCR was used to determine the amount of plasmid that co-migrates with (and thus might be integrated into) genomic DNA.

Results: Biodistribution of DNA Plasmids

- Most plasmid remains at the site of injection.
  - **Transcription persists for several weeks.**
  - **Plasmid is detectable for several months.**
  - **Plasmids encoding self proteins may persist and be transcribed for longer periods (months ---> years).**
- Some plasmid migrates to other sites.
  - **Lymphoid organs (draining lymph nodes, spleen)**
  - **Solid organs (liver, testis) at low frequency**
  - **It is unclear whether free plasmid reaches these solid organs or is transported there by transfected WBC.**

Persistence/Integration of DNA Plasmids

- Plasmid persists long-term primarily at the site of administration.
- Plasmid levels fall by >3 orders of magnitude within 2 months of administration.
- Fewer than 300 copies of plasmid/million host cell genomes persist long-term.
- Calculated integration rates are 1,000-fold lower than the natural mutation rate.

Proposed Revisions to CBER Guidelines

- Integration studies will be required only when persistence studies indicate that plasmid is present for prolonged periods at high copy number (>300 copies/10^6 host genomes) *in vivo*.
- Biodistribution/persistence studies will be waived for DNA vaccines demonstrably similar to those already approved for clinical trial.
- Sponsors should contact the FDA for advice when:
  - **new or significantly modified plasmids are proposed for clinical use and/or**
  - **the formulation of the DNA vaccine and/or it's method/route of delivery may significantly increase cellular uptake or alter plasmid distribution**

General Safety Concern

Do novel vaccines cause local or systemic tissue damage?

Pre-Clinical Safety Assessment

Animals immunized twice/month for 5 months.

- No lasting change in immune milieu.
- No deaths
- No weight loss
- Normal serology and urinalysis
- No macroscopic or microscopic changes in:
  - **spleen**
  - **liver**
  - **intestine**
  - **lungs**
  - **lymph nodes**
  - **kidney**
  - **heart**
  - **adrenals**

Safety Profile in Man

- Several dozen phase I clinical trials of prophylactic DNA vaccines have been conducted.
- Many hundreds of normal volunteers have been vaccinated.
- Multi-milligram doses have been administered repeatedly to the same subjects.
- No serious adverse events have been reported.
- Local reactogenicity has been mild.

Recommendations for Toxicity Studies

- Monitor animal health, local reactogenicity, clinical chemistry and hematology throughout the study
- Evaluate gross and microscopic toxicity:
  - Acutely, 2-3 days after the final immunization
  - Chronically, 2-3 weeks after the final immunization.

Proposed Revisions to CBER Guidelines

- Preclinical safety studies should be performed on every novel DNA vaccine or vaccine/adjuvant combination.
- Toxicity studies should use the highest dose of vaccine planned for clinical administration.
- Vaccine can be delivered on an accelerated schedule:
  - Vaccination intervals shorted to Q 3 - 4 weeks
  - Immunize with N + 1 doses of vaccine.
- CBER may modify the requirements for preclinical safety evaluation in select situations:
  - Where multiple variants of a specific gene (such as HIV-1 Env) are cloned into a common plasmid vector
  - When a complete safety evaluation has already been performed on a similar plasmid construct.

Potency Testing

- "A potency assay should measure the level of production and immunogenicity of the gene product expressed by the plasmid vaccine."

  Points to Consider on Plasmid DNA Vaccines (12/27/1996)

- Potency should quantify the vaccine's ability to induce a specific response, such as an immune response in mice or the production of the pertinent antigen in a transfected cell line.
- Potency tests may be performed *in vitro* or *in vivo*.

Proposed Revisions to CBER Guidelines

- Considerable flexibility will be allowed in the selection of potency assays for use in phase I trials
  - **Assays that monitor in vivo immunogenicity are preferred.**
  - **In vitro measures of transfection efficiency are also acceptable:**
    - **Production of the encoded protein**
    - **Transcription of the gene into mRNA.**
  - **As product development proceeds towards licensure, evidence that the selected potency assay correlates with in vivo immunogenicity should be provided.**
- INDs must provide adequate data on the sequence, purity, integrity and concentration of the DNA vaccine.

Future Concerns

- Improvements in vaccine formulation/delivery may increase plasmid dissemination, cellular uptake, persistence, and the risk of integration or toxicity.
  - Intranasal, oral and i.v. routes may more efficiently disperse plasmid throughout the body.
  - Liposome encapsulation or electroporation may increase plasmid uptake and the range of cells being transfected
  - Changes in vector/gene may increase the risk of integration.
  - Changes in CpG content may alter toxicity
- Dose escalation increases all risks:
  - 20 ug ---> 7,500 ug per subject.
  - Multiple doses of multiple plasmids are being administered.
- Use of novel cytokine encoding plasmids.

Conclusion

As CBER accumulates experience with novel types of DNA vaccine, novel vaccine/adjuvant formulations, and novel vaccination strategies, our science-based review of these products will continue to evolve.